

ZEN IN LAS VEGAS

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It is wonderful to be here in Singapore at the Whole World Is A Single Flower Conference. It is also an honor to be given an opportunity to speak to you a little bit about why this sangha gathering is so auspicious, and why Zen Master Seung Sahn considered it so important.

Almost everyone in the world, if you were to meet and ask them, knows or at least has heard about Singapore. It can be said that Singapore is a world class city, not unlike Paris, Rome, London, Hong Kong, New York, and other world destinations.

Where I call home has gained in thirty short years world-wide popularity as well. I live in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. Las Vegas is known for its neon, fancy hotels, restaurants, and gambling.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said that everyone wants things, chases things, and is attached to those things. These are the maxims which command Las Vegas. The spiteful snakes of sex, money, rich food, and power are the deities of choice there, insulated by an industry that not only tolerates them, but, in fact, exalts them.

I did much of my early Zen training in Los Angeles at Dharma Zen Center with Zen Master Ji Bong, and became a dharma teacher in 1994. Around that time, Zen Master Seung Sahn would visit Las Vegas fairly often, primarily as a patient of the famous Korean acupuncturist, Dr. Ju Cheon Lee. One night, over dinner, knowing that I had recently become a dharma teacher, he looked at me, smiled and said, "So, maybe a Zen center will now appear in Las Vegas?"

"That would be wonderful," I replied, and suggested he might send someone, a monk or nun, to oversee this undertaking, a response he acknowledged with a laugh, "Oh no, no... This is your job!" I learned never to argue with Zen Master Seung Sahn! Shortly thereafter, Great Brightness Zen Center appeared. We are now in our twelfth year.

"Everybody comes into this world carrying nothing," Zen Master Seung Sahn has said. "Everyone leaves for someplace, also carrying nothing. We cannot take anything with us. Yet in between, everybody wants things, chases things, and is very much attached to things."

Zen Master Seung Sahn realized that human beings the world over, whether in Paris, Rome, Singapore, Las Vegas, or elsewhere, have the same desires and wants, but he also taught that if we "put down," our wanting, attaching, checking, and holding, then we can attain the same mind as Mahakashyapa when the Buddha held up a single flower and Mahakashyapa simply smiled. At that time the whole world became a single flower. The wisdom is timeless. When you think and I think, our minds are different. However, your before-thinking mind is your substance. My before-thinking mind is my substance. The whole universe before our fragmented opinions, judgments, and opposites thinking is just like this—complete and undifferentiated.

Since our Zen Center opened in Las Vegas, many, many people have come there. Many have already experienced the futility of chasing after things, and the resultant suffering born out of their attachments. In Buddhist circles, Las Vegas has often been called "big, desire mind." The allure of instant riches, good times, and sense gratification has its list of clients. From prostitutes, gamblers, alcoholics, and drug users desperately seeking their true life's direction to Anglican priests, rabbis, and Christian clergy, families with small children, and everyone in between, Great Brightness Zen Center has welcomed them all.

So the question arises, are Las Vegas, London, Paris, Rome, New York, and Hong Kong the same or different examined from this mind light?

When we quiet the mind and look carefully at our experience, we see that this world is a world of constant change and insecurity. Anything that arises in our life, no matter how hard we try to stabilize it, will pass away. Whatever appears is transitory and thus can never last. Consciousness and object reveal themselves to be continually dissolving like snowflakes on a hot oven. Whatever appears is not dependable, and there is no refuge, no anchor, no safe haven.

The quest for instant gambling riches, pleasure and sense gratification is hollow, and at its core, devoid of substance.

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I would like to quote Zen Master Seung Sahn from his dedication speech for our Zen Center in Las Vegas. He said “In this desert, an oasis has appeared. If there is no oasis in the desert, there is no place for people to drink water, and if you have no water to drink, you soon will die. Las Vegas has been called the city of desire, or the city of sin. A Zen Center in this city of desire is just like a beautiful oasis appearing in this very dry desert. This effort will produce much dharma water. This dharma water will give great enlightenment to the thirsty students, and will help save many beings.

“Our Buddhism is not just getting happiness for ourselves. Our Buddhism is finding our own mind light and using this illumination to shine on all beings. If we find this mind light together, then this truly can become Great Brightness Zen Center. Dae, or great, means no opposites. Myung, or bright, means no shadow. If we acquire our true nature’s light, then there is no shadow.”

So whether we make our home in beautiful Singapore, or Paris, Rome, London, Hong Kong, or New York, our jobs fundamentally are the same. Thirsty students are everywhere. Buddha, some 2500 years ago, said this world is an ocean of suffering. What was true then, is true now. With over 6.5 billion people on this planet, all of us must share equally in this great task of offering dharma water to thirsty students.

How do we quench the insatiable thirst of I, my, me? By our example, we can demonstrate that a life of mindfulness and compassion is the true way. The simplicity and precision that is each moment is attained when we perceive life with a mind that is clear like space. This is our true nature. When we can do this without giving rise to thoughts of gain or loss, then truly we can help save all beings from suffering. The legacy we leave, this world is not our acquisitions. How we keep our minds, how we act, and how we live our life is our true legacy to this world.

Let us all enjoy this international conference, eat together, drink tea together, and express together the essence of “Whole World Is A Single Flower.” ☸

